

8

1914

The Empire in Arms



Companion
of

Donald Macmillan

"Let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the Nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan; to do all things which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all Nations."—*Lincoln.*

The Empire in Arms.

We are all unhappily only too familiar with the subject of my observations. This will exempt me from troubling my readers with too many details. I will, therefore, plunge in *medias res*, and am quite sure they will understand why I adopt this method of treatment.

The Germans could have gone from their own country directly into France, but not so easily. They thought, as through Belgium. They consequently made Belgium the door-mat for the German jack-boots, desolated that fair land, laying waste its countryside, burning its towns and villages, slaying men, women and children, and destroying the finest treasures of art and architecture. There is nothing more wicked and shameless in all the Records of War. Nor is there anything more heroic than the magnificent, though unequal, resistance of the Belgian King and the Belgian people.

How has this war come about? The Germans say that England is responsible for it, but how

[NOTE.—Substantially a verbatim report of a speech made on 9th November, 1914, before The Egham Literary and Debating Society, by DONALD MACMASTER, K.C., M.P. MONTAGU HARRIS, Esq., in the Chair.

can that, with any truth, be said? All our interest was in the maintenance of peace, and we tried in every way to retain peace and refer the immediate subject outstanding to a Conference of the Powers.

Germany would not have that—that way peace lay—Germany did not want peace. She wanted war, and in order that she might conduct the war in her own interest tried to bargain with us to remain outside and neutral. We asked both France and Germany if they were prepared to respect Belgian soil and Belgian independence by not passing their armies through Belgian territory. Both France and Germany (Prussia) as well as Russia and ourselves, were parties to a treaty to respect Belgian neutrality. France at once assented, so did Bismarck when asked the same question in 1870, but the Germany of 1914 would give no assurance, and on the 4th of August, in defiance of all international obligations and of good neighbourhood, proceeded to march her armies through Belgium (with whom she had no quarrel) to attack France. Now it is important to have the German point of view on this outrageous proceeding.

This is the statement made by Dr. Bethmann-Hollweg, their Chancellor in the Reichstag, on 4th August last:—

“Gentlemen,—We are now in a state of necessity, and necessity knows no law! Our troops

have occupied Luxemburg, and perhaps (as a matter of fact the speaker knew that Belgium had been invaded that morning) are already on Belgium soil. *Gentlemen, that is contrary to the dictates of International Law.* It is true that the French Government has declared at Brussels that France is willing to respect the neutrality of Belgium as long as her opponent respects it. We knew, however, that France stood ready for the invasion. France could wait, but we could not wait. A French movement upon our flank, upon the lower Rhine, might have been disastrous. So we were compelled to override the just protests of the Luxemburg and Belgium Governments. *The wrong—I speak openly—that we are committing, we will endeavour to make good as soon as our military goal has been reached. Anybody who is threatened, as we are threatened, and is fighting for his highest possessions can have only one thought—how he is to hack his way through—(wie er sich durchhaut)!*”

It is the merest trifling with truth to say that we brought on the war. We never desired war, nor had we any material interest to serve by war. We wished for nothing better than to be left alone to develop our World Estate.

The truth is we were unprepared for war. Our Standing Army was small in numbers, our Militia was not on a war footing, and our Navy, strong and glorious as it is, was short of fast cruisers

capable of promptly hunting down the various commerce destroyers created by Germany and judiciously distributed in the distant seas. Germany was prepared on Sea as well as on Land, and had been preparing for this war for the last thirty years. To her the moment was opportune to strike: she was carrying out the old Prussian policy of Frederick the Great, who said:—

“He is a fool, and that nation is a fool who, having the power to strike his enemy unawares, does not strike and strike his deadliest.”*

She did hope and believe that Great Britain would stand out, but even if we did come in, the Emperor and his Generals had every confidence that they would—

“Walk over French’s contemptible little Army.”

They know better now.

Unprepared as we were, it is better that the war should have come now. The war was bound to come sooner or later against the British nation, because we are the nation whose destruction Germany sought as essential to her own aggrandisement, and as it was certain we would have to fight Germany sooner or later, it was better to have the fight out when we had powerful Allies.

* “Germany strikes when Germany’s hour has struck.”

—Lord Roberts at Manchester.

than to face the conflict single-handed. Fortunately for us, the very madness of German statesmanship forced Austria to press her humiliating demands on Servia to such a degree that Russia, the natural protector of the Slav races, was compelled to intervene, with peaceful intentions, asking Austria to stay her hand until wiser and disinterested counsel could prevail, when adjustments could be made and peace preserved. Then came the insolent notice from the Kaiser that unless Russia stopped mobilisation, in a few hours, a state of war would exist between Russia and Germany. This brought Prussia on the scene, and with Russia came France : Russia's Ally.

Now the object of Germany was clear, to violate the neutrality of Belgium, march her army through it by the shortest route, crush France before she could get ready, and when crushed, turn the entire German army against Russia, which it was expected would be slow in mobilising, and which could be easily held in check by the Eastern German armies, until France had been crushed and the Western German armies set free to co-operate in the subjection of Russia. Had this plan worked out it is perfectly possible that with France crushed, the united German armies with the Austrian-Hungarian forces might have successfully withstood the Russian advance, and might have closed the war with France humbled and prostrate, its seaboard just opposite our own transferred to

Germany, the Belgian Kingdom wiped out and Germanised, a large slice of Russia added to Germany, and Servia an Austrian province.

I say that might well have been one result if that scheme had worked out, and it might be an interesting aside to query what would have been our position if we stood aside and permitted this to be done? How long would it be before we were wiped out, if we should have to fight single-handed this new and powerful German Empire with an army twenty times greater than ours and a fleet in all probability larger and stronger? But there were just a few reasons why the scheme did not work out and why we hope and believe it never will work out. The first is the glorious, the heroic resistance of Belgium, which delayed the invaders until the French got time to find themselves.

The second reason is the prompt presence in France of "French's contemptible little army," that made such a splendid stand and in every one of the battles upheld the honour and fine fighting qualities of British soldiers. There is nothing in war that exceeds the valour, the skill, and endurance of our Army at the front.

The third reason for the scheme not working out is the presence of our superb Navy, which has sterilised the German Grand Fleet, so-called, stopped all German imports and exports, protected our own commerce to such an extent that

we scarcely feel the pressure of war, though the greatest war the world has ever known is raging almost within our hearing.

Right well, too, has our Navy upheld its traditions of the sea, though the larger opportunities for conquest were denied it by the timidity, or should I say the caution, of its opponents. So much may not be said for the Admiralty, who appear to have grievously underrated the number and gun power of heavily-armoured German cruisers on the high seas, which exposed not only much commerce to destruction, but also our gallant sailors, who had to face unequal contests in old and under-gunned ships. They, however, fought bravely and died game.

There is a fourth reason for the failure of the German scheme. Russia did come on grandly and quickly with her mighty and victorious legions, and taught the haughty German that it would require more than all his strength to stay her sure advance. There can be no doubt that we owe, and acknowledge, a great debt of gratitude to Russia for relieving the pressure in the Western theatre of war.

We must not forget the aid we received from Japan, our powerful ally in the Far East.

I have said that for thirty years Germany has been preparing for this war. Her statesmen, her

soldiers, her writers, her professors, and her preachers have instilled into the German mind that Germany must trust to the sword to enable her to acquire an expanded Empire—a World Empire—larger and greater than our own, an Empire, in fact, dominating the world.

Von Bernhardi frankly confesses it in discussing "The next war." The idea is crystallised in the song "Deutschland uber Alles" (Germany above all), and in the watchword "World-power or Downfall." These are the stakes for which Germany is playing to-day, and the main obstacle to the achievement of her purpose is the British Empire, which stands in her way, and must be rent asunder in order that Germany may get her share of the earth. We are the Lion in the path, and for this reason this nation is more bitterly hated in Germany than all the other nations on the face of the globe. We are hated, too, most heartily for coming into the fight at this time. We were told before the war that our own title to our great Overseas possessions rests upon priority in robbery, that we are a decadent nation, that our pretence to power is a sham, and that we must make way for the culture and sway of Germany! We are also told that the highest culture is born of war, and that the supreme object of nations is only achieved by war. This is the creed of Treitscke, who preached it openly in speech and writing for 30 years. The creed has now obsessed

the whole German mind—of people and Kaiser alike. Moreover, there are Germans to-day so self-deceiving as to believe that this war has been brought on by England, and many more Germans better informed are mendaciously asserting the same thing.

Our Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith, has said that we have gone into this war in defence of our own honour and to uphold the public law of Europe. That is undoubtedly true, but there is even more than these involved in this struggle, the greatest that the world has ever known. The very existence of our Empire is in issue, and that issue will be decided on the battlefields of Europe. Our great Dominions have realised the momentous character of the issue, and they are sending to us their best in men and material to lighten the titanic burden that is falling on the Motherland. They awakened early to a sense of duty, and Canada was foremost in the coming. Verily one is proud to be a Canadian. This is "Canada first" in reality.

[And now Australia has covered herself with glory: the *Sydney* has smashed the *Emden*. Advance Australia! India has sent two Army Corps to the battlefields. The children of the Empire are getting together.]

But we may ask have the people of the United Kingdom fully realised the issues that are at stake? I doubt it. The response from

those that have volunteered has been noble. But there are others, and it must be admitted that there is some ground for abstention from service, altogether apart from the question of patriotism. Many see that the provision for dependents in case of death or permanent disablement is insufficient. This must be remedied. Others see that equality of service is not demanded, and that shirking is privileged. This should not be. We were not prepared for this war. We had not sufficient trained men ready to take the field, and we had not the arms and equipment for those that required training. We must lose heavily in human life and in money for our lack of foresight and our lack of preparation. We were warned of the danger by our greatest soldier and wisest patriot and by others too; but we heeded not the warning. And this is the great lesson that this struggle teaches us, that never again shall these islands be without one million of men trained to serve their country at the outbreak of war, with ample arms and equipment to enable them to render prompt and efficient service. This does not mean the maintenance of a standing army of 1,000,000 men in time of peace, but it does mean that every youth must undergo a course of training that will qualify him to fight for his country in self-defence and for self-preservation. For unpreparedness, even if happily we do succeed now, we shall pay a triple price in gold and blood. Meantime what is our duty? We

must strain every nerve to make good these deficiencies. Fortunately, the nation is united in its purpose, united, perhaps, as it never was before. The people are splendid. The rich and the poor, the titled and the untitled, the idler and the toilers are vying with each other in rendering service to the country. Some are giving in blood, others in gold. Some in blood and gold.

As this is the home of freedom for all, I hope that before the close of this war we shall have heard the last of comparisons between the classes and the masses, for we are proving by the day's work that we are all one in heart and soul and purpose.

Let us hasten to support the men at the front, who are laying down their lives for us. Our brothers are calling to us from the trenches. They must not call in vain. One hundred years ago our forefathers in a long and bloody war against an aspirant for world-power, purchased for themselves and for those who succeeded them one hundred years of peace. We are the inheritors of that bounty. Now, after the lapse of a century, the burden has been cast upon us under almost similar circumstances of purchasing another hundred years of peace for ourselves and our successors. This is a great task—much greater than has fallen to the nation-

before—but if we are true to duty we shall accomplish it. And if we are not true, then we will deserve the fate that unmistakably will await us in this life and in the pages of history. If we succeed, then I think we may forecast that our descendants will not have to refight the battle a century hence, for by that time these islands and our Dominions, Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (to say nothing of India and our other great Dependencies) will number at least 300,000,000 of free men, British born, and of European descent, whose voice and power will be effective to proclaim and maintain “peace among ourselves and with all nations.” Let us then do our duty in our day, avoiding vain and boastful speech, thrice armed by the justice of our cause, putting our trust in God. And here I recall the noble words of Lincoln when his country was involved in war, but how applicable in our situation:—

“Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God will that it continues until all the wealth piled up by the bondsmen’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous

altogether.' With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all things which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Envy, Jealousy, and Grasping Greed are at the bottom of German aspirations in so far as the British Empire is concerned. The Despoiler of Belgium, the joint Assassin of Poland, occupies a poor pedestal from which to reproach British Statesmen or the British Race. It is true that part of our acquisitions are the avails of war, but we can say with truth that we have governed the conquered honestly and in their own interest; and when they were fully qualified for it, the most absolute Rights of Self-government were ungrudgingly conceded to them. Take, for example, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, and Newfoundland. To the minds of many foreigners these great self-governing States are mere Dependencies or tributaries of the United Kingdom. Nothing is further from the truth—they are absolutely self-governed, and practically independent nations. Their Constitutions are very

Charters of Liberty, and in these the King reigns as absolutely under the advice of his local Cabinets as he does at Westminster.

King George V. is a many-headed Sovereign. If he is not personally present, he is as effectually present for the purpose of reigning at Ottawa, Melbourne, Wellington, St. John's and Cape Town (or Pretoria) as he is at Westminster.

It does not lie in any German's mouth to reproach the British race with rapacity or public robbery. This great Empire which is ours to enjoy and maintain was created, it is true, in times and circumstances of trial and battle, by a race that had "the wit to plan, and the strength to execute," and were equal to facing every danger on sea and on land. As Watson has truly said:—

"Time and the ocean and some fostering star
In high cabal have made us what we are."

And for what we are, and for what we have been, as a people, and as an Empire, none of us need blush for shame, while everyone may rejoice in the enjoyment of Justice and Liberty, an inheritance that will not be sacrificed to the greed of any Despoiler. We may not have succeeded in every venture, but on the whole, our showings are the

best and the greatest of any of the nations. We have taken hard knocks and have given hard knocks, and in the end survived and prospered. Shelley truly says:—

“Beaten back in many a fray,
Newer strength we'll borrow,
And where the vanguard stands to-day
The rear will come to-morrow.”

Our cause in this war is the cause of humanity and civilization, and it must prevail, not merely because it is right, but because the whole might of our Allies, and of ourselves, must and will be exerted to make right prevail. We are fighting against arrogant militarism reaching out for world-power, against a nation that violates its own plighted faith and ruthlessly attacks a weak and unoffending country whose integrity it had guaranteed; we are fighting for peace and good order in the community of States and the right of each State to enjoy liberty and peace. And we but too plainly see that our own destruction as an Empire is an indispensable preliminary to the substitution of German “culture” for British justice and British freedom. May God forbid that the day should ever dawn when we must give way to such humiliation. Meantime, the duty is with us, to safeguard public honour, and our national heritage. We are still a race of

freemen, and we intend to remain freemen. The Kaiser has overlooked an ineffaceable truth which our Canadian poet, Bliss Carman, has crystallized in inspiring and undying words:—

“There are people who are loyal to the glory of
the past,

Who hold to hearts' traditions and will hold them
to the last,

Who would not sell in shame the honour of their
name,

Though the world was in the balance and a sword
thereon was cast.”





